

As It Is Written

“If the King’s English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.”
- Miriam “Ma” Ferguson

This delightful quote was attributed¹ to Ms. Ferguson during her campaign for the governorship of Texas (which she won!) in an attempt by her opponents to portray her as backward (she opposed bilingualism in Texas schools). The humor of this anecdote arises because most of us know that English was not the original language of the Bible.

The downside of this [mis]understanding is that we also tend to believe that the biblical texts have been conveyed accurately. This is almost always a safe assumption. Mistranslations are rare and most of those that are known are thought to be of little consequence. However, much of the Bible’s nuance, and therefore its deeper meanings, cannot be adequately expressed in English. The two languages (not to mention the cultures in which they arose) are vastly different. In this article we will examine one such example of lost nuance. So, put on your grammar hat and join me in a two-part exploration of Genesis 2:1-3.

In the first sentence of Genesis 2:1, the divine author writes,

Thus were the creation of the heavens and the earth completed, including all their hosts.

In this verse, the Hebrew verb meaning “*completed*” occurs in a special form² that serves to intensify its meaning. What do I mean by intensify? Consider the verb “*broke*”. In English, we could intensify ‘*broke*’ by using ‘*smashed*’ or ‘*shattered*’. Unlike Hebrew, English requires different words to intensify meaning. Hebrew, unlike English, uses the same word but with a different spelling/pronunciation. For example, here is how ‘*broke*’ is intensified in Hebrew:

Normal	Intensified
<i>/shavar/</i> (He broke)	<i>/yeshaver/</i> (He smashed) ³

Even worse, the English verb ‘*completed*’ (used in 2:1) is not readily intensified so that the word’s intensified nuance is lost in the translation. In Hebrew, the intensification would have been immediately and clearly understood. Here, for example, is a paraphrased translation of verse 2:1 that more accurately represents what the ancient Hebrews would have understood.

“Make no mistake and let there be no doubt – At the end of the sixth day, the creation of the heavens and the earth and all their parts were (and are) fully complete”

¹ Falsely as it happens.

² Called the *Pual* stem.

³ What Moses did to the stone tablets.

The author is going out of his way to convey to the audience the finality of God's creative work. Which raises the question – why is this important? You will have to wait till next month when we take up the theological significance of the Bible's emphasis on the finality of completion.

Now, go and study